

# The Beast

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*This is the only story I wrote while I was living in China.  
So it is not about China at all. It is about Ohio.*

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I was 13. It was spring, the barren time in March when you cannot be sure if it is really warmer, but you are so desperate for change that you tell yourself the mud at the edge of the sidewalk is different than winter mud and you are sure that the smell of wet soil has suddenly a bit of the scent of summer rains, of grass and drowned earthworms. And it has, because it is spring and inside the ground something is stirring. I was wearing a yellow linen dress which my mother had picked out and which I therefore disliked although I knew it flattered me. My shoes were white and I was concentrating on keeping them out of the mud. My father and I were going to mass--my mother did not go; she was Protestant. My father put his hand on top of my hair, his palm on my head, and I could feel the bone of my skull and my skin and his hot palm, so dry and strong. When I was a little girl, he did that often, and called me 'Muscles.' He had not called me Muscles or put his hand on my head for a long time. I could not help arching my back a little, I wanted to push against his hand like a cat but the instinct that comes with being 13, the half-understood caution that makes a girl timid, or wild, the shyness told me to just walk. I wanted to feel the rough edge of the pocket of his coat against my cheek, but I was too tall. I wanted to be seven again, and safe. But I still wanted to push against his hand and put my hand in his pocket and steal the leather palmed glove, that secret animal.

Instead I went into the church, took a Bulletin, dipped my finger in Holy Water and genuflected. The inside of the church smelled like damp wood and furniture polish, not alive at all. My father took off his coat and draped it over the edge of the pew and when I came back from communion I stole his glove. The paper taste of the wafer was still in my mouth and I took a deep breath of the leather. It smelled like March.

We walked back through the school because it was drizzling, my father tall in his navy suit and my shoes going click on the linoleum. There were two classes of each grade, starting at the sixth and going down to the first. The hall ended in a 'T' and we went left through the gym, walked underneath the bleachers and stood next to the side door, waiting for the rain to stop.

It was dark under the bleachers. My father was a young man, 35, younger because he liked to be outside, to play softball on Saturday and to take my mother and me camping on vacation. He stood rocked back on his heels with his coat thrown over his shoulders and his hands in his pockets. I thought of bacon and eggs, toast with peach jam out of the jar. I was so hungry.

The space under the bleachers was secret and dark. There

